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ABSTRACT

Case studies and historical notes are presented to suggest that the seemingly clear and familiar categories (including "college," "university," "public," and "private") carry legacies of complicated origins and connotations. According to conventional wisdom and popular belief, the typical state university is characterized by the following: community service, state pride, extension programs, applied studies and research, tax-supported funding, low or no tuition, secular education, open admission and access, and egalitarian composition. Careful historical study indicates that these features were introduced and/or developed in what has been called "private" or "independent" campuses. There has been no convincing historical connection between popular interest, public support, or state approval of proposals for a state university whose educational mission was in areas of utilitarian studies and services during the nineteenth century. The "state university" has been thought to promote popular education by accommodating large numbers of students. An analysis during the 1880s found that two-thirds of the largest 26 American campuses were private colleges. Technical and scientific schools were often started via bequests and donations from private donors. The implication is that despite the tendency to view private-public dichotomies, American campuses were often acquiring a hybrid curricular and financial arrangement. Implications of these issues for the present are briefly noted. (SW)

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Gilt By Association:
Symbols and Categories of Institutional Prestige in Higher Education

John R. Thelin

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The Historical Name Game

A department chairman, asked to eulogize a less-than-famous colleague, diplomatically told mourners, "Our departed scholar wrote without fear -- and without research."[1] That is also an appropriate appraisal of the use of institutional names and groupings in American higher education, as administrators and faculty indulge in a peculiar past-time: selectively invoking collective symbols and antecedents which "make a case" for present and pragmatic institutional demands or interests.

Familiar key words in this vocabulary are "college," "university," "public," and "private." Or, one might cite the Group I through Group VI categories used by the Carnegie Commission during the 1970s as the compressions and associations from which we base subsequent analysis. Yet these apparently straightforward, neutral categories are the source of a complicated historical contest. In the course of discussions of funding, support, curtailment, or expansion, these categories quickly

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are embellished with historical, even moral, connotations. The historic categories with which an institution aligns itself are crucial for determination of institutional policies and strategies. Sequences of categorical adjectives carve up the higher education landscape; e.g., the "small, private liberal arts college" is pitted against the "large, impersonal state multiversity." Such contrasts usher in point-counter-point arguments in which symbols and innuendo are piled atop one another, far beyond the original categories. It is a strategy by which a single campus gains collective strength -- Gilt by Association -- by seeing itself as part of some over-riding sphere or tradition -- the "public sector," the "collegiate ideal," ad infinitum. The fact that there are large colleges, small universities -- or, that institutions have shifted alliances over the years -- tends to be ignored as a nuisance which impedes higher education debates and polemics.

The Great Historical Name Game is hardly new to American policy-making, for we find as early as 1832 that Philip Lindsley, an innovative college president who sparred with numerous legislatures and boards of trustees, tired of the abuse of names and categories. In calling a truce to the practice, he pleaded:

> I care as little about names as any man. If the name of college or university be unsavoury in the ears of the people or of the people's guardians and conscience keepers, let it be cashiered. Let our colleges and universities be called academies, lyceums, gymnasia, common schools, or popular intellectual workshops -- or by any other republican appelation, if any more or less invidious can be invented. 2

Lindsey's logical and well-intentioned plea was ignored. Nor does this essay intend to revive his campaign to rid American higher education of the historical name-dropping past-time. Rather, case studies and historical background will be presented to suggest that the seemingly clear and familiar categories (including "college," "university," "public," and "private") carry legacies of complicated origins and connotations. Although we look to the categories for order, the snags, over-laps, and identity-crises are, in fact, the general rule. Consider the following vignettes to illustrate the distinction between institutional character and collective identity:

Item: About ten years ago when several branches of the California State College system were granted "university" status, logos and letter-head were changed from "California State College at _____" to "California State University at _____." Along with that predictable and reasonable revision, alumni were notified that for a fee they could have their diplomas retroactively changed so as to bear the new "university" status. Did this mean that they had been attending a true university all along? Did the status or value of the degree change with the new "university" nomenclature?

Item: To what extent does an institution's name convey its character or affiliation? There appears to be little correlation between city support and campus name. The University of Pittsburgh, for example, was not a "city" college, but a private or independent university for several decades -- until the 1960s when it became a state institution.

If there is any signficant trend in the association of a city's name with a campus, it tends to indicate a Catholic institution; e.g., Boston College, Providence College, University of San Francisco, University of San Diego, St. Louis University, Seattle University, and Portland University.

Beyond the anecdotes and minor irritants of the preceding examples, let us turn to curious associations and confused categories in major categories of American higher education -- the private and public sectors.

Confused Categories

According to conventional wisdom and popular belief, it is the archetypal "State University" to which we attribute the following dimensions of public higher education:

community service
state pride
extension programs
applied studies and research
tax-supported funding
low or no tuition
secular education
open admission and access
egalitarian composition -- away from social snobbery and exclusion

Careful historical study, however, indicates that these features were introduced and/or developed in what we call private or independent campuses.[3] In fact, there has been no convincing historical connection between popular interest, public support, or state approval of proposals for a state university whose educational mission was in areas of utilitarian studies and services during the 19th century. The "State University" has been celebrated for its capacity to promote popular education by accomodating large numbers of students; when this self-

congratulations became warranted is not altogether clear. Historian James Axtell, for example, checked enrollment figures during the 1880s (the height of the "university-building" vogue) and found that two-thirds of the largest twenty-six American campuses were private colleges. Amherst College, for example, was as large as the state University of Wisconsin; Wisconsin enrolled more students than did Indiana University; Yale was far larger than such Midwestern state campuses as Michigan or Missouri.[4]

To complicate categories further, we find that technical and scientific schools were often started via bequests and donations from private donors. The old, private liberal arts colleges "acted like" multi-purpose universities whose historic heart (the undergraduate college) at least shared a campus with professional, utilitarian, and state facilities. Despite the rhetoric of applied and utilitarian studies associated with state universities, many land-grant and Morrill Act programs first were set up at private colleges.[5] The American patchwork is suggested by the following mid-19th century summaries:

> Dartmouth College, medical department, the New Hampshire College of Agriculture, the Chandler Scientific School.
>
> Cornell University: college of arts and sciences, State of New York agricultural college, various professional schools.
>
> Harvard College, Bussey Institute (agriculture) and the Lawrence Scientific School.
>
> Yale College, the Sheffield Scientific School (which included the state of Connecticut's land grant funds and private donations).

The implication is that despite our penchant for the private-public dichotomies, American campuses were often acquiring a hybrid curricular

and financial arrangement. So, although a Daniel Webster might capture hearts with his tearful defense of the beleaguered small college, that institutional image did not prevent Dartmouth from going beyond the liberal arts into agriculture and medicine. Conversely, studies of "bootleg" teaching at state agricultural colleges have documented that students and faculty often allied to study the liberal arts and sciences, even though official catalogues delineated animal husbandry as the curricular mission.[6] If competition between private and public institutions strikes us as fierce, one also ought observe budget presentations before state legislatures in which the rivalries proceed along the following lines:

University of Michigan vs. Michigan State University
University of Kentucky vs. University of Louisville
Texas A and M vs. Texas Tech University
University of California vs. California State University and Colleges
Indiana University vs. Purdue

On close inspection, the ideal of a public university providing state-wide cohesion and loyalty seldom has been realized. Within each state, public sector tensions attest to the tenacity of campus expansion and rivalry.

The "Standard American University," Circa 1910

Despite identity crises and confusions, by 1910 editor and journalist Edwin Slosson was confident that he could delineate the features of the "Standard American University."[7] In choosing campuses for inclusion in his anthology, Great American Universities, he noted, "The essential difference between a university and a college is the way they look. The

university looks forward and the college looks backward." A little later, however, Slosson himself conceded that the dichotomy between "college" and "university" was not as clean as his epithet suggested. Certainly, there was no strong clustering of "great universities" along the lines of "public" and "private" affiliations. Slosson's anthology may be broken down as follows:

Endowed Universities	State Universities
Harvard	Michigan
Columbia	Minnesota
Yale	Wisconsin
Chicago	California
Cornell	Illinois
Princeton	
Pennsylvania	
Stanford	
Johns Hopkins	

Slosson admitted that Princeton was "still a college in spirit," yet argued that no survey of great American educational institutions would be complete without Princeton. Other identities were scrambled, as Cornell did not seem like a state university at all, "but rather, like Yale, Harvard, or Princeton."

How does Slosson's typology and "Standard American University" designation fare when one looks at institutions beyond the select fourteen which he studied in 1910? Again and again, the "public" and "private," "college" and "university" terms require bending, suspension, or careful explanation as indicators of institutional character. An interesting case is the University of Kentucky -- an official name adopted six years (1916) after Slosson's observations. Working back through records and catalogues from several archives and libraries, one pieces together a

fascinating, complicated course of development, dissolution, merger, and affiliation.

Prior to 1916 there appears to have been no "University of Kentucky," although the state university claims its founding was 1865. What one does find is that from 1865 to 1878 Kentucky's land-grant Agricultural and Mechanical College existed as one of several colleges of "Kentucky University." According to "Kentucky University"'s official catalogue of 1895-1896, the University's organization included an Academy, and Colleges of Liberal Arts, Bible, Commerce, and Music. Especially pertinent for our "public" and "private" dichotomies is that Kentucky University summarizes its institutional history as follows:

> Organized as Bacon College in 1836; United in 1865 with Transylvania University, which was established January 1, 1799. . .

These records -- and their tales of institutional openings, closings, and changes in campus sites -- suggest that the state's University of Kentucky has direct historical connections with two private colleges, two religious denominations, three location changes, and no fewer than four name changes -- all of which was not straightened into familiar categories until 1916. The residual hypothesis is that most American institutions have inherited a checkered past -- despite the images of endurance and permanence which campuses attempt to project.

Recurrent Implications and Complications

There is little reason to believe that the shifting alliances and identity crises of the 19th century colleges and universities are wholly

a "thing of the past." Constructing and refining valid and signficant institutional groupings remains an elusive task in light of new additions to the higher education lexicon. One interesting recent variation on bending institutional terminology has come about at the University of California, Berkeley where alumni are asked to make donations to Alma Mater because the state university prefers to describe itself as tax-assisted, in place of the former tax-supported designation.[8] Conversely, one finds that private colleges and universities are sometimes recognized as state or regional resources, regardless of governance or funding structure.

The proliferation of such terms as "Federal Grant Universities," or "Sea Grant Campuses" render simplistic the former public-private distinctions. Perhaps the memorable contribution of the 1970s to the category list is that of "benchmark institutions" -- a convenient reference by which Presidents and Deans argue for increased funding as safeguards for institutional reputation.

The categories of institutional identity are, of course, subject to manipulation. Regional accrediting agencies, whose handbooks include increasing attention to provisions for having "significant institutional change" be reported and be tied to institutional charter and mission, remind us of the temptations for deceit in the ways colleges and universities portray themselves to various internal and external constituencies. Again, the crucial test might be stated as follows: when there is evidence that a campus has announced a drastic or dramatic change in name or association, does the change signal a mere shift in alliance and cosmetic

appelation, or, has there also been commensurate change in the substance and structure of the institution? If the preceding historical probings have shattered the seemingly stable configurations of American higher education, there is a measure of consolation in Oscar Wilde's quip that "Consistency is the last refuge of the imagination." The categories and associations with which America's colleges and universities have aligned themselves certainly entitles these institutions to claim a tradition of imagination.

Notes

1. The apocryphal incident is based on tales and lore attributed to Professor Carl Becker, long-time and prominent historian at Cornell University.

2. Philip Lindsley, 1832 Baccalaureate Address, appearing in Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, editors, American Higher Education: A Documentary History (vol. I) (University of Chicago Press, 1961) p. 376.

3. See esp. Merle Borrowman, "The False Dawn of the State University," History of Education Quarterly (1961) pp. 6-20.

4. James Axtell, "The Death of the Liberal Arts College," History of Education Quarterly (Winter 1971) pp. 339-354.

5. Data on institutional arrangements have been drawn in part from John S. Whitehead, The Separation of College and State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973) and Hugh Hawkins, "The University-Builders Observe the Colleges," History of Education Quarterly (Winter 1971) pp. 353-362.

6. Earl F. Cheit, "Agriculture: The Search for a Dual-Purpose Cow," The Useful Arts and the Liberal Tradition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975) pp. 31-56.

7. Edwin Slosson, Great American Universities (New York: MacMillan, 1910) see esp. pp. 374, 456, and "Introduction."

8. Dick Corten, "Our Gift to Santa," California Monthly (June-July 1978) p. 16.